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TOO FAMOUS TO NAME:
C.P. CAVAFY'S LEFKIOS

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ABSTRACT

It has been assumed that C.P. Cavafy's elegiac poem "In the Month of Athyr" (1917), an epitaph addressed to Lefkios, refers to an imaginary character at an imaginary date. This paper proposes that, in the poet's circum-spect style, the use of that name probably camouflages at least two illustrious historical characters, one pagan and one proto-Christian; hence the intentional ambivalence of the epigraph's date. Both personages shared lives torn between sensuality and the changing moral codes of their time -- preoccupations much felt by a poet constantly struggling to conceal his homosexuality while also protecting the dignity of his painstakingly constructed, strait-laced public image. By revisiting several poems, this essay highlights C.P. Cavafy's dissimulating techniques and the literary masks he employed in order to veil two iconic personalities most akin to his own self-censuring lifestyle and the exigencies of his artistic concerns. Finally, this article attempts to establish a clear symbolic and existential link between these paradigmatic martyrs and Julian the Apostate, the figure the poet celebrated in twelve poems which distill his bitter self-awareness, all the while sheltered by the timeless city of Alexandria, his safe haven.

TOO FAMOUS TO NAME:
C.P. CAVAFY'S LEFKIOS

«Η ιστορία ἀρδεύει τὴν τέχνη ἢ ἡ τέχνη
--ἐν προκειμένῳ ἡ ποίηση-- δημιουργεῖ ἱστορικὴ
πραγματικότητα;»

“Does history nurture art or does art—in this instance, poetry—create historical reality?”¹

The recent documentary “The night Fernando (*sic*) Pessoa met Konstantinos Kavafi” (*sic*), dramatizes an entirely imaginary encounter between the two poets on board the S/S “Saturnia”, on their way to New York City on November 29, 1929, the day of the world market crash. Directed by Stelios Charalampopoulos, it makes a sensitive and most engaging attempt to trace parallel lives for two artists that find themselves adrift among the ruins of cherished empires and past days of glory and pleasure. In a way, it harks back to Edmund Keeley’s felicitous comparison of Cavafy’s lifework to that of other intellectual giants of his time, novelists like Proust, Joyce or Faulkner and of poets like Yeats, Pound and Eliot, although Keeley does not mention Fernando Pessoa.²

1
Θανάσης Βαλτινός, «Ο τελευταίος Βαρλάμης», Εισιτήριο Λόγος στην Ακαδημία Αθηνών, 27 Απριλίου 2010, τ. 85 Β’ [Thanasis Valtinos, “The Last Varlamis”. Inaugural Speech to the Athens Academy, April 27, 2010, No. 85 Β’] p. 150. My translation.

2
Edmund Keeley, *Cavafy’s Alexandria: Study of a Myth in Progress*. Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 151.

This original docudrama follows themes common to both poets as lonely ‘outsiders’ and accentuates the meaning of a personal sense of loss, *dépaysement*, and social degradation set against crucial historical moments. Charalampopoulos’s lens strengthens unwittingly another link between Pessoa and Cavafy, one that has already been explored in a previous publication.³ In that instance, I argued that literature, quickened in history, offers an invaluable tool for grasping the complexity of the writer’s psyche. “The novel,” for example, says Susan Sontag, “is an ideal vehicle, both of space and time.” But she goes on immediately to clarify that time “is not essential for poetry because poetry is situated in the present” and even when poetry tells a story, “Poems are not *like* stories.”⁴ This may seem like a cryptic statement but it makes a lot of sense when we consider the (hi)stories of a poet like Cavafy. Focusing below on the poem “In the month of Athyr,” I propose to consider it essential to his self-definition and self-consciousness and akin to the preoccupations he shared with Fernando Pessoa. In particular, the choice of the name Lefkios (or Leucius, in the Latin version), the supposedly imaginary subject of an epitaph, proves ingenious because it links Cavafy’s erotic poems with his Julian poems—a major part of his opus. Finally, I argue that both of these dimensions coalesce in the idea of Alexandria, the mythical and yet so very real locus of the poet’s tortured perambulations. In that sense, those linkages reinforce both George Savidis’ recurrent description of Cavafy’s writings as a “work in progress” as well as Edmund Keeley’s casting of Alexandria as the poet’s “myth in progress.”

Cavafy (1863-1933) has been quoted
3 Eleni Mahaira-Odoni, *Historical Poetics in Modern Greece: Reflections on Three Writers*. (PDF) Working Papers Series, No. 179, Center for European Studies, Harvard University, (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

4 Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (New York, 2007), 215-16.

repeatedly as a self-described “historical poet.”⁵ The claim seems more than justified by the number of poems that refer to the Greek mythical world, Hellenistic times, Roman historical figures, and the Byzantine era. However, the use of history in Cavafy seems to be the opposite from other 20th century prominent Greek writers like Rhea Galanaki or Thanasis Valtinos, or of any novelist for that matter. The genius of Cavafy, it seems here, lies not in re-telling us a (hi)story for strictly didactic purposes or for the content of the story itself --although, admittedly, he did write a handful of poems that Yourcenar calls “lessons:” she places “Thermopylae,” “The First Step,” “The City” and “Ithaca” in this category.⁶ For Cavafy, the main purpose of the historical poems is to give form and to create art through the exploration of his own psyche. His scrutiny of the past and of times long gone terminates at the present moment of self-absorption and writing to create a new reality. In the process, the historical may become inseparable or indistinguishable from the erotic, as Cavafy himself pointed out.⁷ In contrast to novel writing, the toil that goes into the composition of a poem is not channeled to contemplating the future of a

developing character. Instead, in poem after poem we witness a *nostos* ministering to the present situation in the face of loss, disasters, mourning, physical decay, longing, and thwarted desire, all linked to Cavafy’s personal history.

This self-conscious suspension of time uses the past in order to speak for the poet’s emotions, memories and desires in the present. Oftentimes, this is done in a willfully deceitful manner that Cavafy uses like an actor’s mask by employing poetic symbols. According to C. Dimaras, these symbols should not be considered real.⁸ He points at three of Cavafy’s poems in order to illustrate his point. In “For the Shop”, then in “Aimilianos Monai” and, especially, in “Temethos, Antiochian, A.D.400,” the poet resorts to code language to tell us that what he says is not what he really means and warns us not to be fooled about the real object of that poem:

“we the initiated—
his intimate friends—we the initiated
know about whom those lines were written.
The unsuspecting Antiochians read simply
‘Emonidis.’”⁹

Similarly, in “For the Shop”, the precious items of “his taste” and “desire” are kept hidden, not for sale –like Cavafy’s more beautiful and precious poems:

“He’ll leave them in the safe,
examples of his bold, his skillful

5

Among many commentators on this statement, see Yourcenar’s *Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafy (1863-1933) suivie d’une traduction des poèmes*, by Marguerite Yourcenar and Constantin Dimaras (Paris, 1978), 16. See also, G. Lechonitis, *Καβαφικά αυτοσχόλια*, 2nd ed. (Athens, 1977), 19-20, in G.W. Bowersock, “The Julian Poems in C.P. Cavafy” in the *Official Cavafy Archive*. n. 2 (online)

6 Yourcenar, *Présentation critique...* p. 22.

7 Reproaching Malanos’s critique in an anonymous 1927 article in *Alexandrini Techni*, Cavafy writes in the third person: “He [Cavafy] has three areas of concern: the philosophical, the historical, and the erotic(or sensual). The historical area sometimes touches so nearly on the erotic (or sensual) that it is difficult for one to classify some of the poems in these areas. Difficult: not impossible”. See, Keeley, *Alexandria*, n. 13, p. 185.

8 See C. Th. Dimaras, “Cavafy’s Technique of Inspiration,” in *The Official Cavafy Archive*. See also Alexander Nehamas’s discussion in “Cavafy’s World of Art,” and J.A. Sareyannis, “What was most precious –his Form” (1944) in this *Archive*.

9 Excerpts from all three poems below, in, C.P. Cavafy: *Collected Poems*. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, edited by George Savidis (Princeton, 1992)

work.”

In “Temethos,” the symbolic adoption of an armor to hide the true nature of a man alludes to the poet’s own techniques of dissimulation through the conscious choice of language and comportment:

“Out of talk, appearance, and manners
I will make an excellent suit of armor;
and in this way I will face malicious people
without feeling the slightest fear or
weakness.

They will try to injure me. But of those
who come near me none will know
where to find my wounds, my vulnerable
places,
under the deceptions that will cover me.

So boasted Aimilianos Monai.
One wonders if he ever made that suit of
armor.
In any case, he did not wear it long
At the age of twenty-seven, he died in
Sicily.”

One should add here that this poem straddles at least two Cavafy strategies: while explaining his own ironic approval of dissemblance, he introduces a character who, although not visited through an epitaph/epigraph, dies young, presumably handsome, and most probably “punished” for his wayward lifestyle. Of course, there are other poems where Cavafy points to his covert technique for describing his personal proclivities. Not just in the 1908 «*Τα κρυμμένα*» [“The Hidden,”] where he speaks of «*τα σκεπασμένα*» [“The covered up”] writings, but also in «*Όταν διεγείρονται*» [“When They Come Alive,”] another gem from the 1916 prolific and self-assertive string of poems: “half hidden in your lines” [«*μισοκρυμμένα μες τες*

φράσεις σου»]:

Προσπάθησε να τα φυλάξεις, ποιητή,
όσο κι αν είναι λίγα αυτά που
σταματιούνται.
Του ερωτισμού σου τα οράματα.
Βάλ’ τα, μισοκρυμμένα, μες στες φράσεις
σου.
Προσπάθησε να τα κρατήσεις, ποιητή,
όταν διεγείρονται μες στο μυαλό σου,
την νύχτα ή μες στην λάμψη του
μεσημεριού.

“Try to keep them, poet,
those erotic visions of yours,
however few of them there are that can be
stilled.
Put them, half-hidden, in your lines.
Try to hold them, poet,
when they come alive in your mind
at night or in the brightness of noon.”

Another commentator who knew Cavafy personally, J. A. Sareyannis, confirms Cavafy’s circumspect yet elegantly manipulative ways. He reports that, mindful of his homosexuality, Cavafy was extremely calculating about releasing his poems to carefully designated recipients and tried hard to get them out in indirect and almost devious ways that wouldn’t immediately point to him. His natural timidity was probably exacerbated by the impact of the Oscar Wilde trials for, if Cavafy’s own proclivities were to be exposed, his painstakingly constructed public persona and the very fabric of his life would collapse in a puritanical city like Alexandria.¹⁰

10 J.A. Sareyannis “What was most precious... See also Sarah Ekdawi, “Days of 1895, 96 and 97: The Parallel Prisons of C.P. Cavafy and Oscar Wilde,” *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook*, Year 9, University of Minnesota, 1993. p. 297

The foregoing are only some of the reasons why Cavafy's work took a long time to be recognized for what it really is, i.e., truly universal,¹¹ "super-modern and [still] for future generations."¹² The on-going stream of literature generated by his language, his historicism, his sensuality, his aestheticism or his philosophy of art constitutes a perfect paradigm of the felicitous relationship between the particular and the universal. This is not the place to review those contributions to Cavafy's profile. Instead, I would like to turn to one of his most elegant and famous poems in the light of his dissembling strategies as already illustrated in the poems above.

The poem "In the Month of Athyr" (1917), according to Zisimos Lorentzatos, a distinguished figure in Modern Greek letters, is Cavafy's masterpiece. He claims it is "unique, literally unrepeatable" and "after it, there's nothing like it." It is "truly one of the pieces that "he brought to art" [*«εκόμισε εις την τέχνην»*], as another of Cavafy's titles reminds us.¹³ "In The Month of Athyr" goes as follows:

Με δυσκολία διαβάζω στην πέτρα την αρχαία.
«Κύ[ρι]ε Ιησού Χριστέ». Ένα «Ψυ[χ]ήν»
διακρίνω.
«Εν τω μηνί Αθύρ» «Ο Λεύκιο[ς] ε[κοιμ]ήθη».

Στη μνεία της ηλικίας «Εβί[ωσ]εν ετών»,

11 Διονύσης Καψάλης, «Ο Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης, Ποιητής Παγκόσμιος» [Dionysis Kapsalis, Constantine Cavafy, The Universal Poet"] *Kathimerini*, 06/15/2003.

12 Δ.Ν. Μαρωνίτης, «Απολίτιστα Μονοτονικά: Καβαφικά (2) [D.N. Maronitis, "Kavafika 2,"] *Vima*, 11/02/ 2003

13 Νίκος Μπακουνάκης, «Ο Θάνατος του απολιτικού. Ο Ζήσιμος Λορεντζάτος και ένας προσωπικός απολογισμός». Κριτική βιβλίου Nikos Bakounakis, "The Death of the Apolitical. Zisimos Lorentzatos and a Personal Account". Book review. *To Vima*, February 8, 2004. See also, Ζήσιμος Λορεντζάτος, *Μικρά Αναλυτικά στον Καβάφη* [Z. Lorentzatos, *Mikra Analytika ston Cavafy*], Athens, 1977, 13-14

το Κάππα Ζήτα δείχνει που νέος εκοιμήθη.
Με στα φθαρμένα βλέπω «Αυτό[ν]...
Αλεξανδρέα».
Μετά έχει τρεις γραμμές πολύ ακρωτηριασμένες·
μα κάτι λέξεις βγάζω — σαν «δ[ά]κρυα ημών»,
«οδύνην»,
κατόπιν πάλι «δάκρυα», και «[ημ]ίν τοις [φ]ίλοις
πένθος».
Με φαίνεται που ο Λεύκιος μέγਾਲως θ' αγαπήθη.
Εν τω μηνί Αθύρ ο Λεύκιος εκοιμήθη.

"I can just read the inscription on this
ancient stone.
'Lo[r]d Jesus Christ.' I make out a
'So[u]l.'
'In the mon[th] of Athyr' 'Lefkio[s] went
to sleep.'
Where his age is mentioned —'lived to the
age of'—
the Kappa Zeta shows that he went to
sleep a young man.
In the corroded part I see 'Hi[m]...
Alexandrian.'
Then there are three badly mutilated lines—
though I can pick out a few words, like
'our tea[r]s,' 'grief,'
then 'tears' again, and 'sorrow to
[us] his [f]riends.'
I think Lefkios must have been
greatly loved.
In the month of Athyr Lefkios went to
sleep."¹⁴

Lorentzatos does not develop his argument further than stating that Cavafy scholars have not stressed sufficiently the poet's handling of Roman history;¹⁵ a cryptic statement at best, but probably

14 Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. I have added the column spaces as in the original Greek.

15 Λορεντζάτος, *Μικρά Αναλυτικά...* [Lorentzatos, *Mikra Analytika...*], 25-6

a hint, as I will attempt to show below. In contrast, Daniel Mendelsohn goes into a meticulous textual analysis of “the erotics of the lost” and, in an equally admiring tone, pronounces this poem a perfect example of “the power of poetry” mediated by the conflation of four novel elements in the narrative. What we have here, claims Mendelsohn, is not the contemplation of a dead body but rather of a text, worn, hard-to-read and mutilated. So, instead of describing a body, Cavafy “strings words.” Next, instead of looking at a body, he reads words. So, rather than describe desire, Cavafy offers language. Finally, and most importantly, instead of “speaking of loss, Cavafy speaks of love.”¹⁶

For the discerning reader, this series of concentrated substitutions, driven by a textual economy that reads horizontally as well as vertically, produces very elegant commentary indeed. But the puzzle remains and the question is obvious. Who is this Lefkios (Λεύκιος)? Or Leucius? -- to stick closer to the Greek term, for reasons that will become obvious below.¹⁷ Among Cavafy scholars extant research on Lefkios points to an entirely imaginary character, hidden in a series of epitaphs addressed to other imaginary youths -- Lanis, Iasis, Remon, Ignatius, Ammonis, and Aemilianos Monai. All commentators agree that in Lefkios’s case Cavafy is, once again, addressing a fake tombstone and a concocted inscription.¹⁸ The

16 Daniel Mendelsohn, “Cavafy and the Erotics of the Lost” in *The Official Cavafy Archive*.

17 I agree entirely with Walter Kaiser that the translation of names in the Keeley-Sherrard edition respects modern Greek pronunciation by doing an injustice to the English language. See, Walter Kaiser, *Review of C.P. Cavafy*, in *The Official Cavafy Archives*.

18 Among several works, see, Κυριάκος Ντελόπουλος, *Καβάφη, Ιστορικά και άλλα πρόσωπα* [Kyriakos Delopoulos, *Cavafy: Historical and Other Characters*], (Athens, 1980), 23; Γιώργος Βαρθαλίτης, *Νείλος και Λεύκιος* [Yorgos Varthalitis, *The Nile and Leucius*], ΑΥΤΗ [AVGI] 16/5/2010.

question then is, why would he do that? Surely he must have been aware of the quintessential uniqueness of this particular poem. If so, is he once again hiding and protecting his personal connection to someone from the potential prejudice and/or calumnies of the ‘un-initiated? I submit that the answer is most probably “yes” and shall propose three reasons why.

First, to start with the name, we are dealing with one of the Greek versions of a Latin name: Lefkios or Leucius is the equivalent of Lucius in Latin. The most important Lucius in Roman history was Lucius Aelius Verus Caesar (101-138 A.D.), adoptive son of the Emperor Hadrian in 136 A.D. and most probably his lover. While whiling away as Hadrian’s successor-designate, Lucius fell ill and died, a few months before Hadrian himself. But Lucius was buried in Rome, near Hadrian, by the next Caesar, Antoninus, in the mausoleum now known as Castel Sant’Angelo. Therefore, there is no reason to think that the mutilated inscription on the worn tombstone, presumably somewhere close to Alexandria, would have anything to do with the Roman Lucius.

However, Lucius became Hadrian’s favorite only *after* Antinous (or Antinōos), his truly beloved Bithynian youth, drowned in the Nile in 130 A.D. The story, famous for centuries, has been the subject of several studies,¹⁹ and of many statues and heads of Antinous that grace major European museums. It has also inspired at least one modern major poet, the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935). Pessoa wrote “Antinous”, a 16-page poem in 1915 in perfect Edwardian English and published a

19 Most notably, Marguerite Yourcenar’s, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (Paris, 1954; New York, 1963). See also, Royston Lambert, *Beloved and God: The Story of Hadrian and Antinous*, London, 1984 and Anthony Everitt, *Hadrian and the Triumph of Rome* (New York, 2009) 286-294.

definitive version in 1918.²⁰ Therefore, although, as indicated earlier, Pessoa and Cavafy never met, they shared many similarities in upbringing, choice of themes, sexual orientation and intellectual interests. Moreover, they had a common friend, E.M. Forster, another writer with very similar interests and life choices, who may have acted as an intermediary, informing each man of the other's work. Cavafy had close contacts with Forster from 1916 to 1918 and it is conceivable that Forster may have brought him Pessoa's English manuscripts.²¹

Whether Cavafy was influenced by Pessoa on the subject of Antinous or not, it seems unlikely that he, "the poet of history," who lived just up the river Nile from Antinopolis would not be aware of the tragic story and the legend of Antinous. However, Victorian mores probably prevented him from referring to Antinous directly and dictated the need for using the persona of Lucius and his love for Hadrian, the great philhellene, in order to mask the real subject of the epitaph. Thus, the second reason for thinking this poem might be about Antinous is the importance of the latter's legend and its proximity to Cavafy's own concerns. Sarah

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See George Monteiro, *Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-century Anglo-American Literature.*, Lexington, KY, 2000, XVII and XIX. And, Φερνάντο Πεσσόα. Κ.Π. Καβάφης, *Τα εξάισια όργανα του μυστικού θιάσου.* (Εισαγωγή, σχόλια, μετάφραση Γ. Σουλιώτης[Fernando Pessoa. C.P. Cavafy *Ta exaisia organa tou mystikou thiasou.* Edited and translated by G. Souliotis] Athens, 2009. See also, *Fernando Pessoa: Αντίνοος.* Εισαγωγή-Μετάφραση Κ. Λάνταβος. Αθήνα, 2007 [K. Lantavos, trans., *F. Pessoa: Antinoos.* Athens, 2007, 41pp]

21

See, George Savidis, "Cavafy and Forster" in *Mikra Kavafika*, Athens, 1985. Also, for a detailed study of the Cavafy-Forster relationship, see, Peter Jeffreys, *Eastern Questions: Hellenism and Orientalism in the Writings of E.M. Forster and C.P. Cavafy* (North Carolina, 2005).

Ekdawi quickly dismisses the possibility that the subject of "In the Month of Athyr" is the 'deceased Alexandrian Christian, Lefkios'. However, to record an epitaph in a Christian era does not necessarily make the deceased a Christian, especially when his identity has to be concealed, either in real or in plasmatic/poetic (hi)story. Antinous was deified upon his death and his cult straddles paganism and Christianity. Antinopolis, a city built in his memory and to his glory by the grief-stricken Hadrian, soon became an important Coptic Christian city, Ansen, the site of a visit by the Holy Family and of several Christian martyrdoms.²² This presents another interesting connection and we'll return to the relationship between Christianity and the name Leucius below.

For the moment, concerning the inscription, the question is, why would an epitaph that seems to have been engraved for a Christian in a Christian era, mention the month of death in its ancient Egyptian version and his age in Greek-Christian numbers? By linking the month of Athyr, named for Athor, the ancient Egyptian goddess of Love,²³ with an early Christian date, Cavafy must be resorting to another masking trick. Indeed, in her conclusion Ekdawi acknowledges that Cavafy employed clever ruses to hide his intended meanings. As she states,

"In his use of three Victorian strategies for writing about sex --epitaphs, codes and the classics—Cavafy, like Wilde before him, often contravenes Victorian literary propriety."²⁴

Propriety is a key word here --a concept that underpins masking not just as his main discursive strategy but as his entire life style, sheltered in the

22 See "Ansen/Antinopolis" in *Wikipedia*.

23 Yorgos Varthalitis, *ibid*.

24 See Sarah Ekdawi, "Cavafy's Mythical Ephebes" in *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry*. Edited by Peter Mackridge. Portland, OR, 1966. p.40 and 43.

“cultural intimacy” that he shared with E.M. Forster and, most likely, with Fernando Pessoa.²⁵ Cavafy’s attitude toward religion, religiosity and piety looms large in his work as well as in its subsequent critical reception and should be viewed in light of his obsession with propriety. Diana Haas’ extensive writings on the religious ‘question’ illuminate the magnitude of this theme throughout the poet’s lifework.²⁶ However, in the last analysis, despite his apparent religiosity, Cavafy worshiped Alexandria and all things Alexandrian above everything else. Everything about this city, especially its past, including his own earlier days and social status, was the *topos* that defined his psychic, physical and intellectual horizon and nurtured his universality. By identifying himself as «ελληνικός» i.e., in Modern Greek terms, *of Greece* and *of Greek* –be it descent, language or (Hellenistic) revival-- Cavafy sidestepped the issue of his strict adherence to a religion, even though he seems to have followed much of the church’s ritual –another ruse.²⁷ At the

25 I owe this concept to Michael Herzfeld’s insights in *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* Routledge, 2005. It describes a process of self-legitimation derived from discontent for the mores and rules of the nation-state which is thus and consequently validated.

26 Diana Haas, *Le Problème religieux dans l’œuvre de Cavafy: les années de formation, 1882-1905*. Presses Paris Sorbonne, 1996. See also, her «'Αι Αρχαί του χριστιανισμού': ένα θεματικό κεφάλαιο του Καβάφη» [*“The Beginnings of Christianity”: A Thematic Chapter in Cavafy*] in the Cavafy Archive/ Kavafology

27 “Cavafy once said to Stratis Tsirkas, *Είμαι κι εγώ Ελληνικός. Προσοχή, όχι Έλληνα, ούτε Ελληνίζων, αλλά Ελληνικός*: T. Malanos, *Περί Καβάφη* (Alexandria, 1935), p. 56.” Quoted by G.W. Bowersock, “The Julian Poems of C.P. Cavafy,” in *The Official Cavafy Archive*, n. 43. One should stress however, that for Cavafy, «ελληνικός» stands surely for “Hellenic”, i.e., related to Hellas -- *classical* and Hellenistic Greece and its entire aesthetic, philosophical and cultural universe. In our days, and in Modern Greek parlance this distinction has been obliterated by an indiscriminate and unhistorical

same time, much of his poetry focuses openly on his preoccupation with an ambivalent historical character like Julian the Apostate who bridged paganism and Christianity and probably provided the poet with a paradigm for his own lifestyle in the context of an ‘eternal city’ like Alexandria.²⁸ It seems highly unlikely that within that Alexandrian myth and its pagan and deeply erotic reverberations there would be no place for the deified Antinous.

All the same, Cavafy did not have to be explicit about his writing: “The poet”, says Michael Walzer, “needs fellow citizens, other poets and readers of poetry who share with him a background of history and sentiment, who will not demand that everything he writes be explained. Without people like that, his allusions will be lost and his images will echo only in his own mind.”²⁹

Lastly, the third reason for suggesting that “In the month of Athyr” is most probably about Antinous lies in Roman history, just as Z. Lorentzatos has noted but never amplified. Historically documented facts inform us that:

“[On T]he first of the month of Athyr, the second year of the two hundred and twenty-sixth Olympiad [...],” Antinous drowned in the Nile, a probable suicide.

This is how Marguerite Yourcenar opens her usage of the terms Hellas and Hellenic Republic.

Regarding Cavafy’s ‘non-partisan’ attitude to religion, see Sareyannis, “What Mattered...” also, Edmund Keeley, “The Universal Perspective,” in *The Official Cavafy Archive*. n. 6.

28 Much has been written on Cavafy’s ambivalence on religion. See especially, Diana Haas, *Le problème religieux...*; G.W. Bowersock, “The Julian Poems”...; and Peter Jeffreys, *Eastern Questions.*, ch. 4.

29 Michael Walzer, “Philosophy and Democracy” in *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*, edited by Derek Matravers and Jon Pike. New York, 2003, 363.

inspired, well-researched narrative on Antinous's tragic death.³⁰ The phrase apparently originates in the *Historia Augusta*, and in several collections of Greek and Latin inscriptions cited in her endnotes. Cavafy's exact and double repetition of the phrase "In the Month of Athyr" seems too much of a coincidence.

Just before going to Alexandria, Hadrian and Antinous had traveled through Syria and Jerusalem –the Roman-era Seleucia (or, in E. Keeley's rendition, Selefkia). This area had been burnt by Trajan, the previous Emperor, but was subsequently rebuilt and restored by Hadrian.³¹ Therefore, to speak of Seleucia as a lively region with a thriving marketplace is to refer obliquely to Hadrian's works and time. The scene described in Cavafy's "One of their Gods" (*Ένας Θεός των*), another 1917 poem, has often been associated with the figure of Antinous strutting through the market of Seleucia on his way to the neighborhoods of the night. A rudimentary internet search yields several sites which ponder this poem, with the consensus pointing to Antinous as the poem's subject. Whether this is right or wrong, considering the actual events, this conclusion is probably correct because Hadrian and Antinous did travel through the region shortly before the youth's death. Dipping into real Roman history, Cavafy speaks achingly of a young man's beauty and follows him with longing and a *frisson* about his intentions and his lofty identity –a subject of much daydreaming (*ερέμβαζαν*) among passers-by, including the poet himself. Cavafy, of course, knows that this is "one of their gods," but once again he keeps that precious bit of knowledge to himself:

Όταν κανένας των περνούσεν απ' της Σελευκείας

30

Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, 195 and 303.

31 *Ibid.*, 184 ff.

την αγορά, περί την ώρα που βραδυάζει,
σαν υψηλός και τέλεια ωραίος έφηβος,
με την χαρά της αφθαρσίας μες στα μάτια,
με τ' αρωματισμένα μαύρα του μαλλιά,
οι διαβάται τον εκύτταζαν
κι ο ένας τον άλλο να ρωτούσεν αν τον γνώριζε,
κι αν ήταν Έλληνα της Συρίας, ή ξένος. Αλλά
μερικοί,
που με περισσότερο προσοχή παρατηρούσαν,
εκαταλάμβαναν και παραμέριζαν·
κ' ενώ εχάνετο κάτω απ' τες στοές,
μες στες σκιές και μες στα φώτα της βραδυάς,
πληνόντας προς την συνοικία που την νύχτα
μονάχα ζει, με όργια και κραιπάλη,
και κάθε είδους μέθη και λαγνεία,
ερέμβαζαν ποιος τάχα ήταν εξ Αυτών,
και για ποιαν ύποπτην απόλαυσί του
στης Σελευκείας τους δρόμους εκατέβηκεν
απ' τα Προσκυνητά, Πάνσεπτα Δώματα.

"When one of them moved through the marketplace
of Selefkia

just as it was getting dark—

moved like a young man, tall, extremely handsome,
with the joy of being immortal in his eyes,
with his black and perfumed hair—
the people going by would gaze at him,
and one would ask the other if he knew him,
if he was a Greek from Syria, or a stranger.

But some who looked more carefully
would understand and step aside;
and as he disappeared under the arcades,
among the shadows and the evening lights,
going toward the quarter that lives
only at night, with orgies and debauchery,
with every kind of intoxication and desire,
they would wonder which of Them it could be,
and for what suspicious pleasure
he had come down into the streets of Selefkia
from the August Celestial Mansions."³²

32 Translated by E. Keeley and Philip Sherrard.
The verb 'to wonder' does not contain the passive-

I have two minor observations about this and two other translations of this poem. I think that by translating *τη χαρά της αφθαρσίας* “as joy of being immortal” (Keeley/Sherrard), or “of immortality” (Mendelsohn), or “of incorruptibility” (Valassopoulo, in the *Cavafy Archive Canon*), an important link to “In the Month of Athyr” is lost or, at least, blunted: what we have there, *μεσ τα φθαρμένα*, [“among the worn out pieces,”] is the opposite of *αφθαρσία*. I would argue that by switching to the ‘joy of being *imperishable*’ in “One of Their Gods” and to ‘among *the decay*’ in “In the Month of Athyr” would sharpen the contrast between the two poems and would actually bring them even closer together.

If piety or the semblance of piety is another clever Cavafy mask at the service of propriety, how does piety and/or (Christian) religiosity relate to the name Leucius/ Lefkios? As it turns out, there’s an intimate connection.

The early Christian era and late antiquity were marked by tremendous ideological, philosophical and religious controversy among powerful emperors, simple people, and the Great Church Fathers –notably, Saints John, Basil, Gregory and Athanasius. In the wake of strict and ascetic Christianity, the Hellenistic era displayed particular resilience in its hedonistic worldview which was reflected in strong philosophical and religious cults, among them, neo-Platonism and Gnosticism. As Pericles S. Vallianos shows, between the 3rd and 4th century A.D., among its early martyrs, the church claims tortured bodies and tormented souls struggling against the chasm between classical philosophy and theological doctrine.³³ Alexandria hosted most of the ensuing participatory meaning of *daydreaming* implied by “*ερέμβαζαν*”.

33 For a concise survey and pointed critique

turmoil: precisely the place where Cavafy, tormented by the duplicity of his existence, torn between his homosexuality and social propriety, tried to define and inhabit a parallel to his own times. As he “accommodated” himself to a city that he had found asphyxiating in his youth,³⁴ he seems to have sought paradigms of his own lifestyle, suspended as it was between hedonism and socially imposed piety, i.e., observance of rules, religious or otherwise. The theme of Cavafy’s sense of ‘imprisonment’ and ‘impasse’ [*εγκλωβισμού και αδιεξόδου*], eventually resolved by his accepting Alexandria as a symbol of hedonism and the most appropriate life choice for him, has also been traced by Yorgos Varthalitis in poems ranging from “The City,” to “God Abandons Anthony” and to “Alexandrian Kings.”³⁵ In fact, there are several poems that tell of the poet’s struggle to define his own place and convey his meaning or emotion through the ‘bending’ of history. Consider the following two:

In “*Τα Επικίνδυνα*” [“Dangerous Thoughts” (1915?)], he locates himself in the middle of the “ethnic”-Christian controversy and slyly favors the heathen—the ethnics:

Είπε ο Μυρτίας (Σύρος σπουδαστής
στην Αλεξάνδρεια· επί βασιλείας
αυγούστου Κώνσταντος και αυγούστου
Κωνσταντίου·
εν μέρει εθνικός, κ’ εν μέρει χριστιανίζων)·
«Δυναμωμένος με θεωρία και μελέτη,

of the “great” church fathers, see, Περικλής Σ. Βαλλιάνος, «Το ψεύδος του ‘ελληνοχριστιανισμού’» [Pericles S. Vallianos, “The lie of ‘graeco-christianity’,” *The Athens Review of Books*, No. 20 (June-July 2011), 33-37.

34 Edmund Keeley’s term, *op.cit.*, p.21 .

35 Γιώργος Βαρθαλίτης, «Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης: ο ποιητής και η ανάκαμψη της Αλεξάνδρειας» [Yorgos Varthalitis, *Constantine Cavafy: the poet and the rebound of Alexandria*] in *e-poema.eu* 2011.

εγώ τα πάθη μου δεν θα φοβούμαι σα δειλός.
Το σώμα μου στες ηδονές θα δώσω,
στες απολαύσεις τες ονειρεμένες,
στες τολμηρότερες ερωτικές επιθυμίες,
στες λάγνες του αίματός μου ορμές, χωρίς
κανέναν φόβο, γιατί όταν θέλω —
και θάχω θέλησι, δυναμωμένος
ως θάμαι με θεωρία και μελέτη —
στες κρίσιμες στιγμές θα ξαναβρίσκω
το πνεύμα μου, σαν πριν, ασκητικό.»

“Said Myrtias (a Syrian student
in Alexandria during the reign
of the Emperor Konstans and the Emperor
Konstantios;
in part a heathen, in part christianized):
“Strengthened by study and reflection.
I won’t fear my passions like a coward;
I’ll give my body to sensual pleasures,
to enjoyments I’ve dreamed of,
to the most audacious erotic desires,
to the lascivious impulses of my blood,
with no fear at all, because when I wish—
and I’ll have the will-power, strengthened
as I shall be by study and reflection—
when I wish, at critical moments I will recover
my spirit, ascetic as it was before .”³⁶

And in describing his chosen place, he takes stock
in 1929 by the rueful «Στον ίδιο χώρο» --“In the
Same Space:”

Οικίας περιβάλλον, κέντρων, συνοικίας
που βλέπω κι όπου περπατώ· χρόνια και χρόνια.
Σε δημιούργησα μες σε χαρά και μες σε λύπες:
με τόσα περιστατικά, με τόσα πράγματα.
Κ’ αισθηματοποιήθηκες ολόκληρο, για μένα.

36 The Keeley-Sherrard translation quoted
from the *Canon*, once again, respects the meaning
of “heathen” vs. Christian, but fails to convey the
importance Cavafy places on antiquity as an “ethnic”
good.

“The setting of houses, cafés, the neighborhood
that I’ve seen and walked through years on end:
I created you while I was happy, while I was sad,
with so many incidents, so many details.
And, for me, the whole of you is transformed into
feeling.”

By ‘bending’ history, that is, by favoring
certain of its aspects in order to carve a place for
his own identity, Cavafy employs all possible
means to expose historical ambiguity and personal
ambivalence, blaming art for the debauchery
to boot! In his 1915 poem “And I lounged and
Lay on their Beds,” as well as in his 1917 “Half
an Hour,” love encounters, fantasies and bitter
disappointments are the stuff of Art and the
hallmark of the poet. Similarly, his struggle with
the ascetic vs. the pleasurable life as a means to
defining his artistic persona is unmistakable in
poems like «Νόησις» [“Significance”]:

«The years of my youth, my life of pleasure —
how well I grasp their significance now.
Regrets are so unnecessary and pointless.
But at the time I couldn’t grasp their significance.
In the wanton ways of my youth
the course of my poetry was laid out,
the contours of my art were fashioned.
That’s why the regrets never took hold,
and any resolve toward restraint or change
lasted never more than a week or two, at best.”³⁷

Religion serves Cavafy just as well. It is
a rich literary tool that sharpens his artistic profile
and justifies his personal torment. His observance
of social graces --like occasionally going to church
and, at the end, reportedly receiving last sacraments

37 Online translation by Stratis Haviaras, *The
Official Cavafy Archive*. The Keeley and Sherrard
translation uses “Understanding” for the poem’s
title.

(as if he, by then a mute, dying of larynx cancer, could object and, besides, what would he gain?) -- doesn't diminish the fact that he made a very clever and calculated use of religious symbols.

To return to "Leucius", church history suggests that we probably have far more than a 'cover' for the cult of Antinous, the martyr-suicide who, obeying an oracle, sacrificed himself for the glory of Hadrian and the future of hedonistic Rome. The philosophical/religious tumult encapsulated in poems like "Myris: Alexandria, 340 A.D.," the internecine power struggles, and the issues of Gnosticism and asceticism can be said to have merged into the historical figure of Leucius Charinus. As already suggested, Cavafy was rather sensitive to the question of Gnosticism -- an early Christian sect that grappled with the question of Christ's corporeality and human nature. In the very telling poem «Ουκ Έγνων» ["You didn't understand"] dealing with Julian the apostate -- his favorite 'villain' -- the poet makes a masterful play with words born of "gnosis" (knowledge/understanding), an unmistakable link between Julian and Gnosticism:

Για τες θρησκευτικές μας δοξασίες —
ο κούφος Ιουλιανός είπε «Ανέγνω, έγνω,
κατέγνω». Τάχατες μας εκμηδένισε
με το «κατέγνω» του, ο γελιοιδέστατος.

Τέτοιες ξυπνάδες όμως πέρασι δεν έχουνε σ'
εμάς
τους Χριστιανούς. «Ανέγνω, αλλ' ουκ έγνω: ει
γάρ έγνω,
ουκ αν κατέγνω» απαντήσαμεν αμέσως.

The Keeley/Sherrard otherwise fine version, of "You Didn't Understand" cannot help missing the original Greek play on "gnosis":

"Vacuous Julian had the following to say about our religious beliefs: 'I read, I understood

I condemned.' He thought we'd be annihilated by that 'condemned,' the silly ass.

Witticisms like that don't cut any ice with us Christians.

Our quick reply: 'You read but didn't understand; had you understood, you wouldn't have condemned.' "

On December 14, the orthodox Christian calendar celebrates the memory of Saint Leucius, together with fellow martyrs Saint Tyrsus and Saint Callinicus.³⁸ As a Gnostic of the mid-third century, tortured and beheaded in 251, Leucius had lived reportedly in great self-contradiction, falsehood, dissolution and impiety and had authored unspeakable apocryphal "apostolic romances." The latter, while widely diffused, were later denounced as heretical and rejected by the Second Nicaean Council in 787. However, in the ninth century, the Patriarch of Constantinople Photios I reinstated Leucius' reputation and named him Charinus -- an allusion to his attained state of grace. A theory has it that Arius of Alexandria, a platonic theologian, carried on Leucius' Apostolic Acts in the fourth century or was probably the real author of the Hellenistic romances attributed to Leucius. In any case, the emblematic figure of Leucius must have appealed to Cavafy's sensibilities and, careful historian that he was, had probably become quite familiar with the martyr's life story.

Saint Leucius, then, probably graces the other side of a coin that features Lefkios/Antinous at the front. In the "Month of Athyr" the deliberate ambivalence of mixed ancient, mythical and Christian dates is dispelled by the assertion that Lefkios was clearly an "Alexandrian". This should suffice for "the initiated". And finally, perhaps Cavafy has provided another, hitherto unnoticed, lexical hint as to the youth's divine/saintly identity.

38 See, Wikipedia entry on Leucius Charinus.

Lefkios did not merely die, as regular people do; he “went to sleep” [εκοιμήθη]: a locution that in Greek ritual parlance is reserved to saints or beatified figures –Antinous the divine and St. Leucius both fit this bill.

That Cavafy’s much examined life delved deeply into an Alexandria where ancient Egyptian, Hellenistic, proto-Christian and Judaic cults ran together gains additional gravitas by his choice of Julian the Apostate for a most powerful paradigm.

The Julian poems have offered ground for extensive and fascinating commentary but few writers have managed to convey the clipped irony of the poems in a style that matches Cavafy’s own: In “Hunc Deorum Tempa Reparaturum,” correcting Cavafy’s bad Latin (“templis”), Thanasis Valtinos, sums up Julian’s life, with particular emphasis on Cavafy’s slyness and bitterly elegant comments.³⁹ In less than eleven pages, Valtinos traverses through five poems in succinct, jargon-free language, with an occasional key phrase from the master’s own mouth: for the Christians, Julian’s encounters with antiquity could only be pointless, “*Αστοχα πράγματα και κινδυνώδη*” (“Things impolitic and dangerous.”⁴⁰) Because Julian’s friends in the poem “*Ο Ιουλιανός ορών ολιγορίαν*” [“Julian Seeing Contempt”] were not Christians, Valtinos quotes the poet stating emphatically “*αυτό ήταν θετικόν*” --i.e., that this was not merely “certain” or “clear” as the Keeley/Sherrard and the Valassopoulos translations have it, but indeed, *positive*, the usual meaning of “*θετικόν*”. Therefore, if we consider also all the

39 Θανάσης Βαλτινός, “Hunc Deorum Tempa Reparaturum”, in *Κρασί και νύμφες: Μικρά κείμενα επί παντός* [Thanasis Valtinos, “Hunc Deorum Tempa Reparaturum”, in *Krasi kai Nymphes: Mikra keimena epi pantos (Wine and Nymphs: Short Texts on Everything)*. Estia, 2009, 310-320.

40

Keeley/Sherrard translation of “Julian in Nicomedia”.

ironic comments on “ethnics” and Christians in the 12 Julian poems, it makes perfect sense to argue that Cavafy is clearly on the side of the heathen. Cavafy, claims Valtinos, although fixated on Julian, his “young and daring hero,” remains always critical, certainly not in the sense of a “parochial church councilor.” This “hypothesis” Valtinos finds entirely justified by the poem he chooses for closing his essay, “*Ιωνικόν*” (“Ionic”) ⁴¹

Γιατί τα σπάσαμε τ’ αγάλματά των,
γιατί τους διώξαμεν απ’ τους ναούς των,
διόλου δεν πέθαναν γι’ αυτό οι θεοί.
Ω γη της Ιωνίας, σένα αγαπούν ακόμη,
σένα η ψυχές των ενθυμούνται ακόμη.
Σαν ξημερώνει επάνω σου πρωί αυγουστιάτικο
την ατμοσφαίρα σου περνά σφρίγος απ’ την ζωή
των·
και κάποτ’ αιθερία εφηβική μορφή,
αόριστη, με διάβα γρήγορο,
επάνω από τους λόφους σου περνά.

“That we’ve broken their statues,
that we’ve driven them out of their temples,
doesn’t mean at all that the gods are dead.
O land of Ionia, they’re still in love with you,
their souls still keep your memory.
When an August dawn wakes over you,
your atmosphere is potent with their life,
and sometimes a young ethereal figure,
indistinct, in rapid flight,
wings across your hills.”

The young and daring emperor’s life is not too different from that of Leucius Charinus who

41 «Μου φαίνεται αδιανόητο ο Καβάφης να διακατέχεται από νοοτροπία συνοικιακού εκκλησιαστικού επιτρόπου. Να αντιπαραθέτει στη μορφή του νεαρού τολμηρού αυτοκράτορα τον άχρωμο Ιοβιανό ή τον μάρτυρα Βαβύλα. Την υπόθεση αυτή ενισχύει το «Ιωνικόν». *Ibid*, 319-20. Valtinos quotes only the first four lines of “Ionic”. English translation by John Cavafy in the *Cavafy Archive*.

was practically his coeval. Apart from the fact that the former was far more illustrious and became the paradigm of apostasy, both figures shared several common traits: lonely, anxious seekers of truth and divine grace, cursed, condemned and visited by rejection, contempt and ‘official’ opprobrium; not to mention torture and beheading. In those figures Cavafy was bound to find his paradigm. And Antinous, in the mask of Lefkios/Lucius, was not only an ancestor, or one among the “doomed Adonis of his Alexandrian epitaphs.”⁴² Although ostensibly devoted entirely to sensuality, he too struggled with piety and propriety before sacrificing his life to the oracle and Hadrian’s apotheosis. Punished for taking their distance (*apostasies*) from the accepted norms of their era, those were iconic figures that Cavafy, the tormented, genteel and pious public servant could sympathize with, in order to live with his skepticism, his scathing rejection of puritan mores *together* with his fear of social disgrace—in short, in suspension.

However, the only place that made this type of life possible was Alexandria: an epiphany, an ingenious *prise de conscience* that lent weight to all his personal choices, wove his personal reality and nurtured his art. It is hard to overestimate the all-redeeming effect of Alexandria and all it stood for in Cavafy’s life. Without revisiting any of several works on this theme—and among them, Edmund Keeley’s remains a classic -- perhaps the single line from Cavafy himself points to the key to his self-definition:

Διαβάτη,
αν είσαι Αλεξανδρεύς, δεν θα επικρίνεις. Ξέρεις την
ορμή
του βίου μας· τι θέρμην έχει· τι ηδονή υπερτάτη.

“Traveler,
if you’re an Alexandrian, you won’t blame me.
You know the pace of our life—its fever, its

42 Edmund Keeley, *Cavafy’s Alexandria...* p. 148.

unsurpassable sensuality.”⁴³

Taking clear distances from Greece proper and from anything related to mainland Greek culture (down to calling his second-rate whisky “Palamas”, after the Greek fashionable poet), Cavafy knew exactly where he belonged. Alexandria, the crucible and cradle of opposing, glorious, dying and nascent mores was the only possible refuge, whether built from historical memory or, by now, lonely, shabby and sad. Already by 1918, he knows where he stands in his «Απ’τες εννιά» -- “Since Nine O’clock”:

[.....]

Με ποιόνα να μιλήσω
κατάμονος μέσα στο σπίτι αυτό.
Το είδωλον του νέου σώματός μου,
απ’τες εννιά που άναψα την λάμπα,
ήλθε και με ήυρε και με θύμισε
κλειστές κάμαρες αρωματισμένες,
και περασμένην ηδονή—τι τολμηρή ηδονή!
Κ’ επίσης μ’ έφερε στα μάτια εμπρός,
δρόμους που τώρα έγιναν αγνώριστοι,
κέντρα γεμάτα κίνησι που τέλεψαν,
και θέατρα και καφενεία που ήσαν μια φορά.

[.....]

“Completely alone in the house,
whom could I talk to?
Since nine o’clock when I lit the lamp
the shade of my young body
has come to haunt me, to remind me
of shut scented rooms,
of past sensual pleasure—what daring pleasure.
And it’s also brought back to me
streets now unrecognizable,
bustling night clubs now closed,
theatres and cafés no longer there.”

Despite its decay, Alexandria became and remained (Edmund Keeley’s) “universal city”

43 “Tomb of Isis” [«Ιάση Τάφος»] Keeley/Sherrard translation.

that contains the “god Alexandria”, a crucible of precious moments that mainland Greece -- a land of trite and comical pettiness-- simply cannot understand. In his 1914 “Going Home from Greece” [«Επάνοδος από την Ελλάδα»], we get a sweeping condemnation:

“Well, we’re nearly there, Hermippos.

Day after tomorrow, it seems—that’s what the captain said.

At least we’re sailing our seas,
the waters of Cyprus, Syria, and Egypt,
the beloved waters of our home countries.

Why so silent? Ask your heart:

didn’t you too feel happier

the farther we got from Greece?

What’s the point of fooling ourselves?

That would hardly be properly Greek.

It’s time we admitted the truth:

we are Greeks also—what else are we?—

but with Asiatic affections and feelings,
affections and feelings

sometimes alien to Hellenism. [.....]”

Ὅστε κοντεύουμε να φθάσουμε, Ἑρμιππε.

Μεθαύριο, θαρρῶ· ἔτσ’ εἶπε ο πλοίαρχος.

Τουλάχιστον στην θάλασσά μας πλεύουμε·

νερά της Κύπρου, της Συρίας, και της Αιγύπτου,

αγαπημένα των πατρίδων μας νερά.

Γιατί ἔτσι σιωπηλός; Ρώτησε την καρδιά σου,

ὅσο που απ’ την Ελλάδα μακρυνόμεθα

δεν χαίροσιν και συ; Αξίζει να γελιούμαστε; —

αυτό δεν θα ’ταν βέβαια ελληνοπρεπές.

Ας την παραδεχθούμε την αλήθεια πια·

εἴμεθα Ἕλληνες κ’ εμεῖς — τι ἄλλο εἴμεθα; —

αλλά με αγάπες και με συγκινήσεις της Ασίας,

αλλά με αγάπες και με συγκινήσεις

που κάποτε ξενίζουν τον Ἕλλητισμό. [.....]

Here we witness the strikingly ironic dichotomy between “what is not us” (Greece

proper) but still “our own” (Greek identity) --what else could it be? Cavafy’s own hi-story, *istoria*, i.e., his otherness, is quite different from what Westerners would consider the exotic otherness of Greece⁴⁴ from which he’s clearly distancing himself in order to inhabit the life of his “Hellenic”, yet non-Greek icons.⁴⁵

Alexandria as a comforting and accommodating *topos* of worldly ambiguity also carries within it an impending sense of doom –a feeling that yet another era is about to perish. Cavafy seems to have been very sensitive to the mounting fragility of his personal, geographical and historical situation, as witnessed by his dramatic reaction to the 1922 fall of Smyrna: as Diana Haas reports the episode, among friends, “suddenly, with a choking voice, he exclaimed: “It is frightening, what is happening to us. Smyrna disappears, Ionia disappears, the Gods disappear...”⁴⁶

Lorentzatos never took the time to explain why “In the Month of Athyr” is a masterpiece. Yet, a masterpiece it is. How else to describe this tender, anguished and minimally masked confession about Cavafy’s own being? If Lefkios stands for Antinous and St. Lefkios (who went to sleep) amplifies and lends further legitimation to the apostate Julian, Cavafy’s use of laconic epitaphic shards parallels the form of the time-ravaged stele which conceals and harbors his own identity and

⁴⁴ The idea of personal *istoria*, distinct from *History*, is richly explored in Michael Herzfeld’s *Anthropology Through The Looking Glass: Critical Ethnography in The Margins of Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 1989.

⁴⁵ Cavafy rarely uses “hellenic” in his poems –“ethnic” and “Alexandrian” suit him better-- except in the poem “The Photograph” [«Ετσι»], a “hidden” poem where he speaks unambiguously of “hellenic pleasure.”

⁴⁶

Conversation with Polys Modinos cited by Diana Haas, *Le problème religieux...* p. 476. My translation.

his *Weltanschauung*. To venture one step further, is it just possible that, hiding under yet another mask, Cavafy is longing for the emotion his own gravestone, however fragmentary, might elicit in posterity? Is he then revealing another truth about himself? The good poet, says Pessoa, must be a faker who never tells the truth, only what should or could be; in this, the use of masks is an essential strategy:

“Masquerades disclose the reality of souls. As long as no one sees who we are, we can tell the most intimate details of our life.”⁴⁷

Having dispersed his identity among more than seventy “others” or “heteronyms,” Fernando Pessoa remains the consummate believer in the truth of masks, most appositely coincident with his own surname: person and *persona*, in Portuguese. One wonders whether the narrative distance resumed with each new persona was not yet another conceit, abdicating him farther from his own soul. Instead, in a single poem, “In the Month of Athyr,” Cavafy can be said to have condensed his entire truth, his life, his choices and perhaps even his expectations for posterity.

By choosing to place himself in the middle of contentious and controversial history Cavafy’s art encapsulates a rare level of self-knowledge.

As Rea Galanaki has observed, “In a nutshell, I would say that the past does not exist in art except as a mirror of creative self-knowledge.”⁴⁸

Writers are probably not very different from other Greek intellectuals or artists who harbor much

47 From “A Notebook that Never Was” by Fernando Pessoa. Translated by Richard Zenith. *Poetry Magazine* (October 2009). See also Pessoa’s “Autopsychography,” translated by R. Zenith, in his edition of *Fernando Pessoa & Co: Selected Poems*. Grove Press, New York, 1998, pp. 3-4.

48 «Σχηματικά θα έλεγα ότι το παρελθόν δεν υπάρχει στην τέχνη παρά μόνον ως καθρέφτης δημιουργικής αυτογνωσίας.» See, *Βασιλεύς ή Στρατιώτης [King or Soldier]*. Agra, 1997, p. 104. My translation.

ambivalence toward history –at once huddling securely inside it while also struggling to break out of it, in search of imaginative transcendence. True art embraces History, and the search for imaginative transcendence maps out the road to self-knowledge and universal resonance. By its very nature, poetry and, more specifically, the making of art (*poiesis*) requires the distillation of hi-story (*istoria*) into memory. In turn, the reproduction of memory celebrates favorite states of mind, real or imagined, that acquire a reality and a materiality of their own by means of the artifact. The work of art crystallizes a particular historical moment and a situational state of mind that, whenever remembered, affords the creator boundless gratification, no matter how distant the original thrill. Tombstones, like chronicles and diaries, serve as props for artifacts that rekindle memory in order to revisit the rapture of moments past, *especially* in the face of an adverse present reality.

Beyond a mere appeal to emotion, memory must lead to the present and have a twofold target: first, it should reconcile the writer with his own situation. Secondly, emotion of remembrance must be able to command broad resonance, universal even, by its grasp of elements at play. Cavafy’s quest clearly fits this rubric. In crossing the distance from his god city to the universal city –to repeat Keeley’s felicitous terms—Cavafy had to build on his own particularity. Torn between being a “Hellenic” non-Greek, a skeptical Christian, an upright bourgeois homosexual and an ageing hedonist trapped in pious, bureaucratic garb, he employed real, imaginary and imaginative catalysts for distilling his existential angst into Art. Undoubtedly Julian has served him famously well. Perhaps Lefkios, in his various incarnations, can now be included in that distinguished line-up.